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ABSTRACT

The use of multicultural literature in the classroom can play a significant part in the learning and acceptance process of students. Multicultural books should be brought into the classroom to enhance textbook materials in all subject matters. To implement a multicultural program in the classroom, teachers must become knowledgeable about the experiences of various ethnic groups. Teachers also need to be aware of classroom dynamics to accurately interpret cultural conflict in the classroom and to assess their own instructional styles and verbal behaviors. Teachers need to develop skills in classroom management and discipline techniques that prevent problems and help children learn to resolve problems as they arise, and they need to learn to evaluate and develop multicultural literature and curricula. (Contains 10 references and a multicultural checklist for evaluating multicultural material. A list of 39 books, reference books, catalogs, and videos is attached.) (RS)

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MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION: A CHECKLIST FOR SELECTING CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN THE CLASSROOM

by

Lisa M. Cavanaugh

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INSIGHTS into open education

MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION: A CHECKLIST FOR SELECTING CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN THE CLASSROOM

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Introduction

The demographics of today's school classrooms are changing. While most teachers are predominantly Euro-American females, students are coming increasingly from culturally and economically diverse populations. Teachers will have to learn to meet these students' diverse needs (Fuller, 1992), and one way to meet them is through children's literature. This article discusses the goals and characteristics of a multicultural education and how teachers can advance a multicultural curriculum by selecting appropriate children's literature for use in the classroom.

The rationale behind multicultural education is to prepare young students for the future in a culturally-pluralistic nation. Educators have the obligation to develop "culturally literate" citizens through the understanding of culture and ethnicity in our society and in our world (Grant, 1978). Before considering how literature that is multicultural can be an important part of multicultural education one must first understand the characteristics and goals of multicultural education.

Characteristics of Education That is Multicultural

The characteristics of a multicultural education can be broken into four levels. The first level is the individual student. When students are taught to accept themselves, they start to develop self-esteem, the second level. Once students possess self-esteem, they may reach the third level where they develop an understanding of the similarities and differences that are found in their classroom, the nation, and the world. From here, students may reach the top level, being concerned with the larger issues and problems which affect people today (Tiedt & Tiedt, 1986):

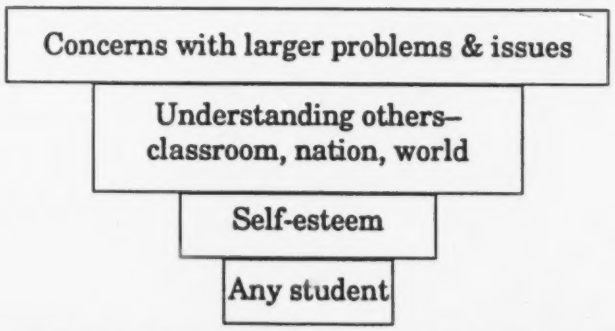

Table 1. Characteristics of a Multicultural Education (Tiedt & Tiedt, 1986, p. 4).

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Goals of Education That is Multicultural

Teachers considering a multicultural curriculum for the classroom need to deal with ethnic groups, religious groups, gender, the rights of all children, and any issues important to the many other groups in the nation today (Tiedt & Tiedt, 1986).

The concept of multicultural education goes beyond awareness of and sensitivity to cultural differences. More important than acceptance and support is the recognition of the basic right of these different cultures to exist (Rodriguez, 1983) and even to flourish.

According to Ramsey (1987), the range of goals for teaching from a multicultural perspective in the elementary grades is as follows:

1. To help children develop positive gender, cultural, class, and individual identities and to recognize and accept their membership in many different groups.
2. To enable children to see themselves as part of the larger society; to identify, empathize, and relate with individuals from other groups.
3. To foster respect and appreciation for the diverse ways in which other people live.
4. To encourage in young children's earliest social relationships an openness and interest in others, a willingness to include others, and a desire to cooperate.
5. To promote the development of a realistic awareness of contemporary society, a sense of social responsibility, and an active concern that extends beyond one's immediate family or group.
6. To promote effective and reciprocal relationships between schools and families. (1987, adapted from pp. 3-5)

These same goals can be applied to selecting appropriate multicultural literature for the classroom.

Literature Relates to Multicultural Education

Literature is one way multicultural sensitivity and knowledge can be integrated throughout the curriculum. Before teachers can start to choose appropriate literature, however, they must consider the definitions of multicultural literature that could be used in the classroom and what the students could gain from its use.

There are many ways of defining multicultural literature. For teachers, it is important to consider what perspective the definition is trying to portray. One author describes multicultural literature as "books by and about people of color" (Moore-Kruse, 1992, p. 3). This definition bases the term multicultural solely on skin color.

Another definition of multicultural literature is "literature that represents any distinct cultural group through accurate portrayal and rich detail" (Yokota, 1993, p. 157). This definition includes distinct religious (e.g., Jewish) and cultural (e.g., European) groups and includes all groups, not just those that differ from the mainstream populations. It also requires that authors have an accurate understanding of the groups they are portraying

whether they are a member of that particular group or not. Some may find this definition to be more inclusive of various aspects of multicultural education in literature than the first definition.

The experience of reading multicultural literature can benefit both non-mainstream and mainstream culture groups. For non-mainstream cultures, it gives opportunities for understanding and developing pride in their heritage (Yokota, 1993) as well as helping develop an understanding of the mainstream population. This includes building positive self-concept and self-esteem in the student.

When reading multicultural literature, students learn vicariously about other cultural groups. This gives them the opportunity to understand people of diverse groups whom they may not have met. Cultural information can be present in every aspect of the story: the description of a setting, the events in the plot, the actions and words of the characters, and the treatment of the overall theme (Yokota, 1993).

Concerns with Multicultural Literature

When selecting multicultural literature for the classroom, teachers need to consider many things.

The Author's Perspective. Even though there has been a recent increase in the number of multicultural books, not all books are authentically written. Teachers should be aware of the predominance of Euro-American authors writing multicultural literature from an "outsider's" point of view. Consideration of an author's perspective is important because it has an impact on the authenticity of the book, along with the illustrations and accuracy of information. If the author is writing from an outsider's perspective one needs to consider the relation the author has had with the particular group. Does the author have an in-depth understanding of the group, or is the author standing on the outside looking in?

The insider's perspective, on the other hand, comes from someone affiliated with the group, or from someone who has a thorough understanding of the beliefs and values of the group by working closely with its members.

Teacher Awareness. A second concern in selecting appropriate multicultural literature deals with a teacher's degree of awareness and attention to other cultures in the classroom (Yokota, 1993). Teachers need to make an effort to learn about their students' cultural backgrounds, beliefs, and other important characteristics, such as social class and level of assimilation.

A student's social class reflects financial assets, prestige, and power (Webb & Sherman, 1989). Furthermore, economic resources also impact other options people may have, such as educational opportunities and health care, to name a few (Fuller, in press).

Another influence on one's culture is the degree of assimilation exhibited by a student and/or expected by the student's family. Assimilation refers to the degree that a person moves

from one cultural group into another–usually from the culture of birth into the mainstream culture (Fuller, in press). In order to better understand what influences a student, a teacher needs to understand the student's traditional cultural beliefs.

Cultural Groupings. A third concern to be aware of when selecting appropriate literature is the tendency to group together certain different cultures as if they were one (e.g., Mexican-American, Puerto Rican-American, and Cuban-American lumped together as Hispanic) (Yokota, 1993). Another example is referring to the various Native American tribes as a single unified group instead of recognizing that each tribe is an entity onto itself. By allowing literature which inadvertently makes such grouping in the classroom, the teacher is unconsciously reinforcing stereotypes.

Selecting Appropriate Literature

Given these issues concerning multicultural literature, it is important to select accurate and appropriate literature which represents cultures other than just the mainstream culture. In other words, when evaluating books teachers need to be aware of the following five criteria (Yokota, 1993):

1. cultural accuracy
2. richness of cultural detail
3. authentic dialogue and relationships
4. in-depth treatment of cultural issues
5. inclusion of members of "minority" groups for a purpose

The first criterion, cultural accuracy, serves as the "umbrella" for all the others. Cultural accuracy means that the issues are represented in ways that reflect the values and beliefs of the culture. This can be portrayed through the four other criteria as well:

Literature that is rich in cultural detail should culturally enhance the story in such a way that the readers gain an understanding of the culture they are reading about. However, the details should not lump together the various cultural groups as stated earlier. Dialogues and relationships need to be authentic and portrayed accurately in order to instill an understanding in the reader. If inaccuracies are portrayed in a book, the cultural group's importance is minimized. It is important to have the issues which are important to each culture portrayed realistically and examined from the perspective of that group. This allows students to think in an informed way about the cultural group.

The final criterion deals with the inclusion of members of a "minority" group for a purpose, not just to fill a "quota." Characters should be seen as distinct individuals whose lives are rooted in their culture, not in stereotypes, and who are an integral part of the story.

The above five criteria should also be supplemented with historical, traditional, or modern perspectives of the groups. Included would be the overall accuracies portrayed by text and illustrations breaking down stereotyped thinking on career and social roles.

Summary

The use of multicultural literature in the classroom can play a significant part in the learning and acceptance process of the students. The literature in the classroom should include all diverse backgrounds found in one's classroom and community, and should also address events occurring around the world.

Multicultural books should be brought in to the classroom to enhance textbook materials in all subject matters. Students will learn about various cultural groups through the vicarious experiences they have when reading multicultural books. Therefore, it is important that the information presented in the text and illustrations be authentic and accurate.

To implement a multicultural program in the classroom, teachers must become knowledgeable about the experiences of various ethnic groups (Gay, as cited in Sleeter, 1992). This includes knowledge of cultural patterns, value systems, communication, and learning styles of the students found in the classroom.

Teachers also need to be aware of classroom dynamics to accurately interpret cultural conflict in the classroom and to assess their own instructional styles and verbal behaviors. Teachers should become aware of their own values and perspectives which should help them accept the student's culturally conditioned behavior without evaluating it automatically as wrong.

Teachers need to develop skills in classroom management and discipline techniques that prevent problems and help children learn to resolve problems as they arise, and they need to learn to evaluate and develop multicultural literature and curricula. This can be done through the use of a personal checklist designed to evaluate textbooks, reading materials, and illustrations.

With the continuing changes occurring in our classroom demographics, all efforts made by teachers to include multicultural literature in the classroom will allow students to grow toward the future of a culturally-pluralistic nation.

Multicultural Checklist for Evaluating Multicultural Literature

Evaluating Literary Elements:

Setting:	Yes	No
Does it include a geographical location?	____	____
Does it include a time in which the story takes place?	____	____
Is the setting portrayed with authentic detail?	____	____
Is the location used merely as a backdrop?	____	____

Point of View:	Yes	No
Who tells the story?		
a) narrator describes the characters?	____	____
b) protagonist tells the story?	____	____
Is author familiar with the language patterns and perspectives of that culture?	____	____
a) written from an insider's perspective?	____	____
b) written from an outsider's perspective?	____	____

Characterization:	Yes	No
Are the characters believable?	____	____
Do they grow and change naturally as a result of the events in the story?	____	____
Do they reinforce societal stereotypes?	____	____
a) Are there gender stereotypes?	____	____
b) Are there cultural stereotypes?	____	____

Plot:	Yes	No
Does the sequence of events seem realistic?	____	____
Does the story hold the reader's attention?	____	____
Is there a conflict?	____	____
What? _____		
_____		
How does it end?		
a) "Happily ever after ..."?	____	____
b) Does it give insight to the problem and provide hope for the future?	____	____

Style:	Yes	No
Are the ideas expressed in an authentic language?	____	____
Does it contain realistic dialogue?	____	____

Culture:	Yes	No
Is the culture portrayed accurately?	____	____
Does it contain a richness of cultural detail?	____	____
Are the dialogues and relationships authentic?	____	____

Are members of "minority" groups included for a reason? ____ ____
How are cultural issues treated? _____

_____

Theme:

What is the main idea of the story? _____

_____

What is the author's perception of the human experience? _____

_____

Other Questions to Consider:

	Yes	No
1. Is the book meaningful?	____	____
2. Does the book succeed in arousing my emotions?	____	____
3. Does it include a range of family roles?	____	____

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Catalogs:

Allyn & Bacon Education Catalog
Dept. 894, 160 Gould Street
Needham Heights, MA 02194-2310

Claudia's Caravan
Multicultural/Multilingual Materials
PO Box 1582
Alameda, CA 94501

Delmar Publishers Inc.
PO Box 15015
Albany, NY 12212-5015

Education Catalog
Harcourt Brace College Publishers
301 Commerce St., Suite 3700
Fort Worth, TX 76102

Empak Publishing Company
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A MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR

Please enjoy this special summer issue of *Insights*.

As you know, for the past two years *Insights* has been struggling with finding enough quality manuscripts for publication on a regular basis. In response to this difficulty, we have taken several steps which we hope will enable continued publication in the future. As you may have guessed, we have foregone attempting to publish our 1994-1995 volume and are instead moving ahead with publication for the 1995-1996 academic year. For those of you who paid for a 1994-1995 subscription, your payment will be applied to the 1995-1996 year. The first 1995-1996 issue will be following this soon. For those of you who are still waiting, we encourage your subscriptions for the 1995-1996 year. We have formed an advisory committee which will help solicit manuscripts for *Insights* and which should also give us more variety. The advisory board members are:

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We're excited about working in this broadened context and hope that you will enjoy its benefits. In the meantime, we continue to encourage you to write for us. We especially encourage stories of classroom practice. Please call me or any of the advisory committee members if you want to chat about your ideas.

Sara F. Hanhan

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